

PASSAIC COUNTY

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT
AND IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

2004

Freeholder Health, Education & Community Services Committee

Freeholder Peter C. Eagler, Chair
Freeholder Sonia Rosado
Freeholder James Gallagher, Chair

Director/Health Officer

Deborah Rucki-Drake

Prepared by:

Steven Peters
Supervising Environmental Health Specialist

October 2003

The Plan

This plan has been developed by the Passaic County Department of Health to identify the most salient environmental issues within Passaic County and to propose a plan to address these issues for calendar year 2004. The Passaic County Department of Health is a county health program that derives authority pursuant to New Jersey Statutes Annotated 26:3A2-21 *et seq*, and is the certified local agency for the provision of environmental health services within Passaic County under the auspices of the County Environmental Health Act (CEHA).

The Community

Geographic, as well as social and economic, characteristics of a county relate directly to the environmental health needs within that county. Passaic County spans an area of northeastern New Jersey that begins a few miles east of New York City and extends up to the New York State border. The geographical area of Passaic County resembles the shape of a "tilted hour glass" and encompasses approximately 199.54 square miles. This unique shape essentially divides the county into two distinct areas: a southeastern section and a northwestern section. This creates two very different environments: an urban environment in the southeastern section that transforms to a rural environment in the northwestern section. Approximately 491,077 (2001, Census Bureau) people live in Passaic County, with the population concentrations being highest in the southeastern section, and falling off as one moves from southeast to northwest.

While there is some consistency between the types of environmental issues that exist in both geographical sections, there are also distinctly different concerns that arise in each section. For example, the urban areas are served by existing infrastructure to deliver drinking water and collect wastewater. Most of this infrastructure is dated, and when failure occurs, there is impact to the public health and the environment. Conversely, the rural areas tend to be supplied drinking water by wells and have on-site wastewater disposal systems. These systems are susceptible to groundwater contamination and are responsible for causing contamination at times. Also, the urbanized areas are more prone to air and noise pollution problems, and all areas have solid waste and hazardous materials/waste issues.

The urban environment in the southeast of the county houses a diverse community, with the remaining portions of the county having less ethnic diversity. Passaic County has a population that is 75 percent Caucasian, 15 percent African American, 4 percent Asian American and the remaining portions split between various other races. Hispanic Americans comprise 32 percent of the population, which may be split between Caucasian and African American races. The median income for Passaic County is \$50,284, with 7 percent of people below the poverty level.

Local Environmental Issues

Due to the demographic diversity in Passaic County, portions of the county split between urban, suburban and rural, there are numerous environmental issues that arise. Unfortunately, due to the demographic diversity there are no single issues that pervade Passaic County as an entire entity. Environmental quality in all areas of concern must be monitored, assessed and maintained.

Two areas of concern account for a large portion of complaints and receive copious attention. Air quality is an issue of concern that results in numerous complaints. The nature of the majority of complaints involves odors. A constant effort is made to respond to all odor complaints in as timely a manner as possible. Many odor complaints entail a temporal component, placing prompt response at a premium. However, missed opportunities to verify odor complaints due to temporal constraints remains a source of consternation for many complainants. Cross training of a larger portion of our inspectors for this activity is a priority to provide for as prompt a response as possible.

Hazardous materials response is a service that requires continuing attention in Passaic County. The pervasive presence of industry through most of the county provides a constant potential of hazardous materials incidents. Passaic County has an extensive hazardous materials response structure comprised of Passaic County Department of Health, Passaic County Sheriff's Department, Clifton Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team and Wayne Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team. Active and potential hazardous materials incidents are quickly assessed and controlled.

Emerging Issues

Emergency Preparedness

The Passaic County Department of Health has obtained a Bioterrorism Preparedness Grant. Several positions have been created through this grant to provide infrastructure for planning and preparedness for potential bioterrorism events. This work is done in cooperation with the Passaic County Office of Emergency Management and Passaic County Sheriff's Department. The primary response mechanism for terrorism and bioterrorism events in Passaic County is the hazardous materials response team that is cooperatively run by the Passaic County Sheriff's Department and the Passaic County Department of Health. Further efforts will continue to be performed to provide increased amounts of planning and preparedness to increase the ability of Passaic County to address any potential terrorism events.

Private Well Testing

The recent passing of the Private Well Testing Act has resulted in many queries by local and county health departments as to what actions are required and what actions would be best management practices for addressing positive results for contaminants in private wells. Passaic County will be establishing a system to sufficiently address this issue.

Underground Storage Tank Impacts to Groundwater

There have been some incidents of significant impacts to groundwater from discharges from underground storage tanks in recent history. A notable occurrence is a recent case of a plume of MTBE contamination impacting public and private drinking wells in Ringwood. Passaic County intends to devote greater efforts toward measures to prevent groundwater contamination from leaking underground storage tanks. In order to pursue this goal, the Passaic County Department of Health is planning to increase the number of underground storage tank inspections performed and to increase the number of inspections performed for gasoline stations as part of the Air Program, which will become more stringent inspections as part of new requirements for that type of inspection.

Resources and Partnerships

Passaic County has an established cooperative program for public and environmental health. Interlocal agreements formalize the cooperative work plans for hazardous materials response involving Passaic County Department of Health, Passaic County Sheriff's Department, Clifton Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team and Wayne Fire Department – Hazardous Materials Team. Passaic County Health Department has an Interlocal agreement with Clifton Health Department to assist in performing investigations of certain types of environmental complaints in the City of Clifton. A Government Public Health Partnership is being formed to establish a committee to oversee the cooperative relationships of the municipal health departments; private health services providers and the Passaic County Department of Health.

The Passaic County Department of Health has expanded substantially over the past year, now consisting of three divisions: CEHA, Public Health/Bioterrorism Preparedness and Mosquito Control. By pursuing grants that have become available, the Passaic County Department of Health has been able to finance significant expansion in programs and services provided. Significant expansion in CEHA activities is warranted and being required by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, however expansion to meet the new requirements is difficult without further funding from the State of New Jersey.